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Nicolette full of confidence but 'could return to typing'

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
of The Gazette

"Hi, I'm Nicolette Larson," the voice announces cheerfully on the phone from Los Angeles. It zings with the kind of confidence that says, "I may not be a household name yet, but I will be."

She certainly seems to be going about it the right way. Her first album, issued just three months ago, has attracted raves, including a *Rolling Stone* magazine critic's award as best female singer of 1978. The New York Times met that by naming her the discovery of the year.

And Nicolette Larson's clear, optimistic voice is heard on two songs currently riding high on the pop charts — backing up Neil Young's *Comes A Time* and her version of Young's *Lotta Love*. Furthermore, her record is being played on "progressive-rock" and "middle-of-the-road" radio stations alike.

All of which leaves the 26-year-old singer pushing for breathing room while she clears up her first priority —finding a business manager.

"I'm trying to ignore as much of the hype as I can," she says. "It's not easy living up to the sudden reputation. In fact, it invites a lot of criticism. All I can say is that I sing real on pitch and I choose good songs. But I never claimed to be the greatest thing since peanut butter."

While dutifully doing interviews and preparing for her first major tour — she previously appeared with folk singer Hoyt Axton and Commander Cody — she tries to escape the madding crowd by "hanging out with my friends." But even that's a problem, because one of her closest friends — who got her into Warner Brothers — is superstar Linda Ronstadt.

"We're just pals," she says. "It's funny, though, because my being a friend of hers seems to be a contingency to all the press I'm getting."

Just the other night, she says, Ronstadt, Larson and *Saturday Night Live* comedian Dan Ackroyd went to see *Pinocchio* together. And she'll be making an appearance on the celebrated Saturday comedy show when she hits New York in March.

NICOLETTE LARSON
Has hit record

Asked if there were rivalries between the new breed of female singers gaining prominence — such as Ronstadt, Emmylou Harris, and Valerie Carter — Larson said, "Well, there are some chicks who snipe at you, but who wants to sit around and listen to that kind of talk? I think we're glad for each other's success. Whenever I go to see Linda in concert she just takes my breath away."

The success of women solo singers and songwriters has been a long time coming, she says: "I'm reminded of the sign on the hotel bar that says '50 per cent topless waiters'. I mean, we do make up half the world. If men could have babies then perhaps they'd be able to understand how important it is for a woman to have a career on her own."

Before she started singing professionally, Nicolette was a waitress and a Kelly Girl secretary. "If it all falls through, I could always go back to that. I type real fast," the voice says with a large wink.

"What I'm doing now," she continues, "is just setting up a business — finding a road manager, surrounding myself with honest advisers, doing all the things that ensure a strong foundation. I'm lucky in that I've seen a lot of people go through what I'm just starting, so I can learn from them."

As for the rock 'n' roll touring grind and the invitation of drugs, she says: "I've been through it early in my life. If I sit around and snort cocaine I can't relate to anyone. If I smoke pot all day, I can't discuss business properly.

"What I really like doing after a show is going out for a good meal — saki and sushi. A big Japanese meal is as expensive as a gram of coke and far more enjoyable. It helps that most of the guys in my band are health nuts — we have our share of sprouts."

As for her album, *Nicolette*, she doesn't want to call it a ground-shaker: "I just aimed to make an enjoyable one, the kind of thing that you can play after coming home tired from work to give you a lift.

It's the same feeling I get listening to a record like James Taylor's *Gorilla*."

After her tour of major record markets, she's looking forward to going back in the studio in April for a new album. "That's the place I enjoy the most," she says.

Fresh-faced enjoyment is what characterizes Nicolette Larson's first album and she is still feeling it while coping with her new-found reputation: "There's no way I want to get trapped up in the hype. I'm just trying to be as normal as I can."

Nicolette Larson

The Pointer Sisters

Issac Hayes

Larson disc a fine debut

SPIN OFF

Nicolette Larson is the latest female super singer to come along in the era of Linda Ronstadt, Emmylou Harris, Dolly Parton, Joan Armatrading, Barbra Streisand *et alia*, and she's worth the advance notices. Perhaps a new singer is at a disadvantage when such praise is heaped upon her debut album, **Nicolette** (Warner Brothers), and there are indeed some reservations about it, but Larson is a most accomplished singer with as much promise as any in the last decade.

There's no doubt she's influenced by the clear force of Ronstadt and the plaintiveness of Harris, but she's able to modulate between these two qualities with remarkable ease and skill. Her style is carefully tempered, yet not at all studied; the lyrics just roll off the top of her tongue. She's flashy, but hardly a show-off.

The major fault of her first album is that the arrangements are a little too smooth to challenge her. More adventurous backings would serve to bring out the qualities of her voice even more.

That aside, this is as pleasant an album as you'll find these days. There are some good songs by Neil Young, Jessi Winchester, Sam Cooke, Burt Bacharach, J.D. Souther & Glen Frey and interpretations that transcend the slickness. She says she likes syncopated rhythms a la Doobie Brothers, but there's only a hint of it here despite appearances by such crack musicians as Billy Payne and Paul Barriere (of Little Feat). Still and all, it's a fine start, one that gives a solid foundation upon which she can stretch upward.

Pointers have 'Energy'

The Pointer Sisters have always had remarkable talents for combining gospel harmonizing with high gloss arrangements, but they haven't had a diverse enough album to get them regularly on the hit parade charts — until **Energy** (Planet-Warners). Now The Pointers are the stars of producer Richard Perry's own Planet label and he seems determined to put them over the top, taking great pains to dress them up with fancy instrumental licks played some of Hollywood's finest sessionmen.

Perry has had a tendency to clutter up his sound with clever ideas, a way of masking the limitations of some of the singers he's produced. He lays off here, suiting the Sisters up with a good set of songs, from Bruce Springsteen's sultry steamy *Fire*, already a hit, to Allen Toussaint's disco funky *Happiness*.

At their most successful, the Pointer Sisters add drama and color to a song. There are a few lapses on *Energy*, where they strut into the prosaic, but not enough to ruin a mostly enjoyable disc.

Toto has nothing to say

Toto (Columbia) is the name of a group of Los Angeles session musicians who've come up with a much-hyped debut album currently climbing the charts. True enough, their performance is totally professional: They bridge the jazz-rock-Doc Sevrenson genres with acrobatic ease.

However, technique comes across as mere hollowness when the music has virtually nothing to say. The music here is made as if the players were in a contest; the togetherness of the band is clearly a product of the recording studio. The vocals, sounding as if they have come direct from every lounge bar in America, blather over the bombast.

Toto is also available as a picture disc.

Is Hayes desperate?

In the decade since Isaac Hayes extended soul music into the realm of pop-schlock with *Hot Buttered Soul*, he has produced only one memorable piece, the soundtrack of *Shaft*. Thus, it's no coincidence that he does a copy of it on his latest disc, **For The Sake of Love** (Polydor), chipping in several songs of the breathy, banal type that made him famous in the first place.

The only aspect of his overly romantic style that's changed is his painful attempt to exploit his initial selling points. Hayes sounds like a jive-talking macho caricature when he intones, in the speech proceding *I Love You Just The Way You Are*: "Sometimes I might even look at another nice-looking lady in passing. But it ain't about nuthin'. If I didn't have an eye for beauty, then how could I justify my admiration for you?" Does anyone dare say this these days?

Hayes spews out lyrical cliches as if he invented them. Not that the album lacks variety. He's included a couple of disco-styled songs to reach the rest of his audience. Despite his "cool, sensitive" exterior, Hayes sounds desperate to make a buck.

Meditation music moves

If you're into mood music, Steve Reich's **Music for 18 Musicians** (ECM-Warners) will get you into a mood. That is, if you're in the mood to listen closely.

Reich has composed a metronomic rhythm pattern that is played in a kaleidoscopic form — every minute of the 50-minute piece offers a different shading. The combination of sounds is fascinating: Violin, cello, two clarinets doubling bass clarinet, four women's voices, four pianos, three marimbas, two xylophones. The sound seems electronic at times, but all the instruments are acoustic.

That's just the tip of the iceberg of the wonderment this record evokes. Each chord played is held for the length of two human breaths. It's all very conceptual and it works like a mystic computer. It's meditation music from start to finish, the kind of thing you have concentrate on to get any relaxation out of it.

Juan Rodriguez

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